

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-09

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6451

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E. O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, IN

SUBJECT: CONGRESS LOSES BY-ELECTIONS

1. BY-ELECTIONS IN INDIA HAVE TRADITIONALLY PROVED MIS-LEADING INDICATORS OF WHAT LIES AHEAD IN GENERAL STATE AND NATIONAL ELECTIONS. IT IS, NEVERTHELESS WORTH NOTING THAT THE CONGRESS HAS DONE VERY POORLY IN THE THREE MOST RECENT BY-ELECTIONS, ALL IN THE HINDI BELT WHICH PROVIDES THE BED-ROCK OF CONGRESS SUPPORT: THE JANUARY 21 POLL FOR THE IMPORTANT JABALPUR, MADHYA PRADESH PARLIAMENTARY SEATS THE DECEMBER 29 ELECTION FOR A BHOPAL, MADHYA PRADESH STATE ASSEMBLY SEAT, AND THE DECEMBER 29 ELECTION FOR A SEAT ON THE DELHI METROPOLITAN COUNCIL. IN ALL THREE ELECTIONS, THE CONTESTED SEATS WERE PREVIOUSLY HELD BY CONGRESSMEN. CONGRESS LOST ALL THREE BY GOOD MARGINS. IN BOTH THE MADHYA PRADESH ELECTIONS, THE CONGRESS LOST TO JOINT OPPOSITION CANDIDATES.

2. THE DELHI PRESS IS ATTRIBUTING SPECIAL SIGNIFICANCE TO THE CONGRESS LOSS OF THE JABALPUR LOK SABHA CONSTITUENCY. THEY

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POINT OUT THAT THIS CONSTITUENCY HAS BEEN WON BY THE CONGRESS

IN EVERY NATIONAL ELECTION SINCE INDEPENDENCE. CONGRESS POLITICIANS WON ALL EIGHT STATE ASSEMBLY CONSTITUENCIES INCLUDED WITHIN ITS BOUNDARIES IN THE LAST STATE ELECTION IN 1972. DURING THE CAMPAIGN, CONGRESS LEADERS INCLUDING THE STATE CHIEF MINISTER, P. C. SETHI, THREW THEIR PRESTIGE AND SUPPORT BEHIND THE CONGRESS CANDIDATE WHO WAS ALSO SUPPORTED BY THE CPI. NATIONAL LEADERS OF THE JANA SANGH, SOCIALIST AND CONGRESS (O) CAMPAIGNED FOR THE JOINT OPPOSITION CANDIDATE. THE OPPOSITION CANDIDATE COMPLEMENTED HIS 3-1 MARGIN IN URBAN AREAS WITH A 2-1 MARGIN IN THE HERETOFORE HEAVILY CONGRESS RURAL AREAS WHICH CONTAINED 54 PERCENT OF THE CONSTITUENCY POPULATION. IN THE END, THE CONGRESS CANDIDATE SECURED ONLY 32 PERCENT OF THE VOTE, AS COMPARED TO 70 PERCENT IN THE LAST LOK SABHA ELECTION. THE OPPOSITION CANDIDATE CAPTURED 68 PERCENT, AS COMPARED TO A COMBINED OPPOSITION TOTAL OF 32 PERCENT IN 1971.

3. COMMENT: WE WOULD NOT WANT TO OVEREMPHASIZE THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CONGRESS' JABALPUR SETBACK. VOTERS IN BY-ELECTIONS NORMALLY APPEAR TO BE LESS CONCERNED WITH NATIONAL ISSUES SUCH AS POLITICAL STABILITY AND PARLIAMENTARY MAJORITIES THAN THEY ARE WHEN GENERAL ELECTIONS ROLL AROUND. BY-ELECTIONS ARE A MORE HANDY WAY TO REGISTER A "PROTEST" VOTE. IN FACT, CONGRESS POLITICIANS HAD BEEN PRIVATELY SAYING IN THE LAST TWO WEEKS THAT THEIR PARTY EXPECTED TO LOSE THE JABALPUR SEAT.

4. WHAT PROVED UNEXPECTED AT JABALPUR, HOWEVER, WAS THE LARGE DEFEAT MARGIN AND THE LOSS OF THE RURAL AREAS WHICH HAVE ALWAYS FORMED THE BACKBONE OF CONGRESS ELECTORAL STRENGTH IN MADHYA PRADESH AS ELSEWHERE. THIS LATTER DEVELOPMENT HAS PROVIDED GENUINE CAUSE FOR CONGRESS CONCERN AND WILL UNDOUBTEDLY LEAD TO SERIOUS THINKING AMONG CONGRESS PARTY LEADERS AT THE CENTER.

5. THE CONGRESS' HEAVY DEFEAT AT JABALPUR, AND THE DECEMBER 29 LOSSES IN BHOPAL AND DELHI DEMONSTRATE FURTHER THAT (A) POPULAR DISCONTENT. FUELED BY THE ECONOMIC SITUATION IS BEING REFLECTED AT THE POLLS; (B) THIS DISCONTENT IS BEING EXPRESSED BY RURAL AS WELL AS URBAN VOTERS, AT LEAST IN SOME AREAS; AND (C) THE OPPOSITION ELECTORAL FRONT IN JABALPUR, PERHAPS EN-

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COURAGED BY "JP'S EFFORTS, (SEE NEW DELHI 15938), HAS MADE AN IMPRESSIVE SHOW OF UNITY THAT MAY BE REPEATED IN OTHER AREAS IN THE FUTURE.

6. THE JABALPUR CONGRESS SETBACK MAY SERVE AS A SOBERING FACTOR IN MRS. GANDHI'S ASSESSMENT AS TO CALLING A SNAP POLL. HER RECENT PUBLIC STATEMENTS ON THIS POSSIBILITY HAVE INDEED BEEN MORE POINTEDLY NEGATIVE. OVER THE LAST TEN DAYS SHE HAS ON

THREE OCCASIONS TOLD REPORTERS SHE IS NOT PLANNING TO HOLD
OIEARLY ELECTIONS.

7. THIS MESSAGE INCLUDES CON GEN BOMBAY'S REPORTING ON
BHOPAL AND JABALPUR BY-ELECTIONS.
SCHNEIDER

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